



# SYRIA AND BEYOND: MANAGING RUSSIAN AMBITIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Cover photo: Presidents Hassan Rouhani of Iran, Vladimir Putin of Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey meet in Sochi, Russia, November 2017. (Photo courtesy President of Russia)

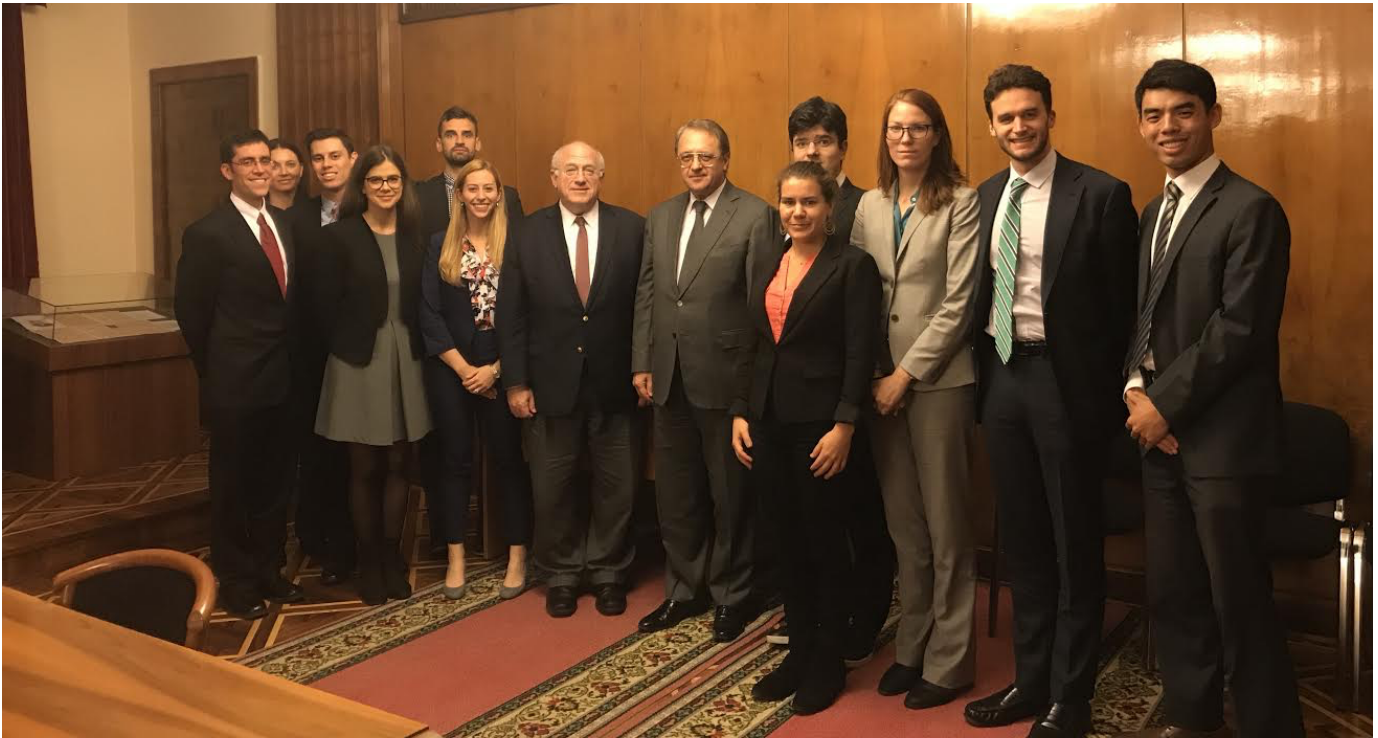
## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is the final report of a 2017 Policy Workshop, the capstone project of the Master in Public Affairs program at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Under the direction of Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer, former U.S. ambassador to Egypt and Israel, 11 graduate students spent several months researching U.S. and Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in order to present U.S. policymakers with recommendations about cooperation, competition, and conflict with Russia in the region.

As Syria is the nexus of Russia's campaign to expand its regional influence, the students decided to focus on Russian and American policy in that country. They consulted 28 current and former officials and scholars in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the United States.

All authors participated in the preparation of this report. As a collaborative project, the report does not represent the views of Princeton University, Ambassador Kurtzer, anyone interviewed for this workshop, or any individual student. Each student also wrote an individual research paper on an aspect of the topic in preparation for this report. Summaries of these supplemental research papers are available in Appendix B.

We would like to thank Dean Cecilia E. Rouse, Associate Dean Karen McGuinness, Associate Director of Finance and Administration Jeffrey Oakman, Bernadette Yeager, and everyone at the Woodrow Wilson School who helped make this workshop possible.



*Policy Workshop members from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School meet with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov in Moscow, Russia, October 2017.*



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## ACRONYMS

<b>DMZ</b>	Demilitarized zone
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<b>JCPOA</b>	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
<b>LANDCOM</b>	Allied Land Command, NATO
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>OPEC</b>	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
<b>P5+1</b>	The five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany
<b>PKK</b>	Kurdistan Workers' Party
<b>PYD</b>	Democratic Union Party
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>UNSCR</b>	United Nations Security Council Resolution
<b>YPG</b>	People's Protection Units

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Russia is actively competing with the United States for influence in the Middle East.**

The Syria crisis is one theater where Russia projects itself as a competitor in great power politics. It has taken advantage of opportunities there to strengthen ties with U.S. allies in the region and present itself as a powerful broker of regime security, undermining U.S. influence in the process. A key tactical partner in this effort is Iran. Because Russia consistently defines its interest in opposition to those of the West, its short-term tactics may have negative and destabilizing long-term consequences.<sup>1</sup> In response, the United States should undertake a concerted diplomatic campaign to defend its interests and allies while signaling openness to working with Russia on issues of mutual concern. We recommend three strategies:

#### **1) Reassert U.S. leadership and credibility, counterbalancing Moscow's influence in the region by bolstering U.S. relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt.**

The resources the United States would need to devote to acquiring significant leverage in Syria should instead be spent reinforcing America's regional alliance system. Russia has taken advantage of its strong position in Syria to create transactional relationships selling arms and nuclear energy to traditional U.S. allies. Although Syria itself is not crucial to U.S. interests, the relationship with these U.S. allies is. The United States should therefore prioritize strengthening bilateral relations with key regional actors to regain the upper hand. In addition to strengthening U.S. credibility and staying power, such an approach will prepare the United States to grapple with the Syrian conflict in the future if the situation devolves into violence once again.

#### **2) Maintain a military and diplomatic presence in Syria to prevent a resurgence of ISIS and al-Qaeda and promote an inclusive peace process in accordance with UNSCR 2254.**

ISIS is nearly defeated from a military perspective, but the United States still has an important, albeit limited, role to play on the ground in Syria and within the peace process in order to address the humanitarian crisis and prevent further conflict, instability, and terrorist recruitment. To counter Russia's pro-regime stance, the United States should bolster the Geneva process as the legitimate forum for achieving a political settlement in Syria on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué and UNSCR 2254. Renewed U.S. diplomatic engagement with partners in the region will be crucial to returning the spotlight to Geneva.

The United States should also focus on "Humanitarian Plus" initiatives to restore basic shelter, electricity, safe water delivery infrastructure, essential medical services, and primary education in former ISIS-held areas outside of regime control, such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzour, and other areas the United States and its allies, Turkey and Jordan, control or support.

#### **3) Challenge Russia to restrain Iran.**

Recent cooperation between Russia and Iran has encouraged the perception that Moscow has influence over Tehran; indeed, Russia has acted as a de facto representative of Iranian positions in talks with other regional players such as the United States and Israel. However, the Russia-Iran relationship is better characterized as opportunism rather than as a binding alliance. The United States should seek to highlight differences between the two states' objectives.

Since an Iran-Israel war would be in neither America's nor Russia's interests, the United States should engage with Russia on a UN Security Council Resolution to create an expanded DMZ in southern Syria. This would lend international legitimacy to U.S. efforts to distance Iranian forces from Syria's southern border. Moreover, the United States must stand by the JCPOA to preserve the credibility of its threats and assurances to Russia and Iran, and to keep Russia accountable for preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.

## INTRODUCTION

Given Russia's structural economic challenges, restoring Russians' pride in their country's international standing is an increasingly vital element of Russian President Vladimir Putin's strategy to shore up his domestic legitimacy. Projecting Russia as a major competitor of the United States in great power politics is crucial to this effort, and Syria is Russia's primary platform for doing so in the Middle East.

Moscow's intervention on behalf of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has precluded the United States' preferred outcome of regime change; bolstered the regional position of Russia's tactical ally, Iran, a rival of the United States and its regional allies; and created opportunities for Russia to build constructive relationships with various American allies and undermine U.S. influence in the Middle East. Although Russia has stabilized Assad's position, it may have increased the potential for conflict in the long term, particularly between Israel and the Iranian forces and militias in southern Syria.

Stymied by the Assad regime's persistence and unwilling to intervene militarily to turn the tables, the United States has ceded primacy in Syria to Russia. However, the United States must not surrender regional leadership to Moscow. In this report, we recommend policies for the United States to compete with Russia for regional leadership, cooperate with it on matters of mutual concern, and prevail in points of conflict.

### Russia's World View

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. policy establishment has struggled to formulate a Russia policy that simultaneously satisfies Russians' desire for recognition as more than a former power while acknowledging the power asymmetry between the two countries. The United States and Western Europe failed to sufficiently incorporate Russia into

the liberal order in the post-Cold War period and now must contend with Russia as a spoiler.

Russia sees itself as a deserving but denigrated and dismissed world power. Many Russians, and certainly the leaders in the Kremlin today, view the 1990s as a period when the West—namely NATO and the United States—took advantage of Russia's weakened position and built a world order without them. The West's expansion of its security and economic sphere into Eastern Europe and the walking-back of promises of investment, coupled with a preoccupation with the Middle East, left Russia and Russians feeling isolated and forgotten.

Vladimir Putin's rule has two aims: 1) preserve the system of patronage and personal enrichment he and his allies created after breaking the power of the original oligarchs established in the 1990s; and 2) restore Russia's role on the world stage and reassert its sphere of influence. The regime is opportunistic and focused on survival and profit. That survival is dependent on a base level of economic stability—essentially, preventing a recurrence of the volatility of the 1990s—and entrenching the regime in the identity of the nation-state.

Putin has actively promoted the image of himself as a modern (re)uniter and protector of Russian greatness. Unable to reconcile itself to the West's vision and values, Russia has sought to reassert itself as an alternative diplomatic and military power, featuring lower standards for human rights and democracy coupled with access to and willingness to use vast natural resources and territory. Russia has used protection of Russian minorities or former Russian territory as a pretext for its attacks on Georgia and Ukraine and support for frozen conflicts in Moldova and Armenia. With its armament and support of the Syrian regime in the face of fierce international criticism, Russia has acted to protect its interests outside its traditional sphere of influence. In each of these instances, Russia has sought to portray itself domestically and internationally as a defender

against NATO/EU/U.S. aggression, and paint the resulting sanctions as unjust.

With an economy largely based on the extraction of natural resources, Russia is highly dependent upon the prices of major commodities, particularly oil and gas, which alone accounted for 46 percent of federal government revenue over the past five years.<sup>2</sup> As a result of weak commodity prices and heightened geopolitical risks related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the value of the ruble plunged<sup>3</sup> in the second half of 2014 and today remains almost 50 percent below its June 2014 value against the U.S. dollar.<sup>4</sup> This has caused a rapid decrease in living standards: household income growth in U.S. dollar terms has been negative each year since 2014.<sup>5</sup> Coupled with ongoing and increasing sanctions and widespread corruption, average Russians are measurably worse off than they were four years ago, which has prompted renewed protests led by an organized opposition that has garnered broader support than other recent movements.<sup>6</sup>

However, Putin's United Russia party remains very popular, and we foresee no serious challenge in the spring 2018 election, a year in which Russia will showcase itself on the world stage by hosting the FIFA World Cup. The Syria campaign is the first time Russia has forward-deployed military personnel and assets since the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Russia sees in Syria not only an opportunity to maintain its foothold in the region via its military bases, but also to demonstrate to the international community—and its own electorate—that it has the capability and influence to be a great power.

## U.S. Interests in the Middle East

Since the conclusion of World War II, the end of European colonialism in the region, and more recently the September 11th attacks, U.S. interests, partners, and presence in the Middle East have increased significantly. Today, the United States maintains a significant conventional military footprint in Iraq and Afghanistan and has deployed

special operations forces to many other states in the region.

Although the United States has never played a significant role in Syria, the civil war has complicated American policy because, as a failed state, Syria could destabilize U.S. allies and partners and serve as a haven for violent extremists and Iranian militants. Moreover, the preservation of the Assad regime precluded the emergence of a democratic Syria that is friendlier with the United States.

American interests in the region should include the following:

1. **Prevent growth of violent extremist organizations.** U.S. domestic security concerns make preventing the rise and spread of organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda a priority.
2. **Support regional allies and partners.** Turkey is a NATO ally. The United States continues to maintain a special relationship with Israel, whose security is threatened by the Iranian military and militia presence in Syria. Other strategically significant regional partners include Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt.
3. **Limit Iranian expansionism.** The United States has a political and security interest in containing Iranian influence and military expansion in the Levant. Iran is funding actors such as Hezbollah and the Assad regime that are hostile to U.S. interests and allies. At the same time, the United States should continue to support the JCPOA as a means of forestalling Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability.
4. **Maintain stability in global energy flows.** Middle East energy supplies are crucial to the world economy. A rules-based order and functioning trade partnerships facilitate American prosperity.
5. **Reassure allies and partners in NATO and the European Union.** The effects of mass migration to Europe as well as the threat of ISIS- and al-Qaeda-trained or inspired terrorists are top



priorities for European leadership, particularly key U.S. allies facing far-right and populist challengers.

## Russian Interests in the Middle East

Although Russian influence in and engagement with the Middle East diminished following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has reasserted itself in recent years. It rhetorically defends the right of regimes to preserve sovereignty and stability by any means necessary, a position analogous to its own doctrine on domestic politics. Otherwise, Russia's diplomatic relationships are chiefly transactional in nature, with tangible points of interest taking precedence over formal alliances.

Russia has used transactions—specifically arms sales and energy deals, among other means—to build productive relationships in the Middle East. There are typically no strings attached to these arrangements; as such, divergence in interests is not necessarily an obstacle to bilateral relations, as exemplified by the increasingly constructive Russian-Israeli relationship. Russia does not intend to recreate U.S.-type relations with Middle Eastern countries, but rather to undermine U.S. hegemony in the region by ensuring there is more than one influential external actor. Thus, the threat Russia poses is not that it will supplant the United States, but rather that it will undermine U.S. bilateral security alliances—a core component of U.S. influence in the Middle East—by diminishing the essentiality of U.S. security guarantees for key countries in the region.

Russia primarily pursues its objectives in the Middle East through its current role in Syria. Although Syria under the Assads has been Russia's primary regional client from even before the Soviet Union's demise, the Kremlin has positioned itself in the center of Syrian politics through its military intervention, and in the center of multilateral talks on Syria's future by organizing negotiations in Astana and Sochi parallel to the struggling Geneva track. It is unclear to us

whether a long-term resolution to the Syria crisis is an urgent priority for Russia; while the Kremlin could burnish its global prestige by brokering a successful settlement, Russian withdrawal would reduce Moscow's contact points with other regional players absent new opportunities for involvement.

Russian interests can be summarized as follows:

1. **Reassert influence on the world stage.** Reenacting the Soviet Union's role as a major player in the Middle East and conducting successful military operations outside their "near abroad" reinforce the domestic perception of Russia as a global power while simultaneously undermining U.S. and European leadership.
2. **Gain and maintain regional influence.** The Syrian government has long been friendly to Russia and is now dependent on it. Syria's neighbors must consult with Russia to ensure the crisis does not spill over their borders. Moreover, Russia's naval base in Tartus and air base in Latakia facilitate power projection in the Middle East and Mediterranean.
3. **Maintain and grow economic partnerships.** The current cycle of low oil prices incentivizes oil-exporting nations to cooperate with each other. Although Russia and OPEC are traditionally rivals, in the last year they have coordinated on oil supply in attempts to affect prices. Using Syria as a showcase for its weapons, Russia has also proactively expanded its arms clientele in the region, notably inking new deals with Iran as well as U.S. partners Egypt and Turkey.
4. **Prevent the spread of violent extremist organizations.** There are more foreign fighters in Syria from Russia than from any other European nation.<sup>8</sup> Russia remains concerned about a possible uprising in Chechnya, where the majority of those fighters originated. Though its methods are not in keeping with U.S. rules of engagement, Russia has an interest in preventing the growth of violent extremist organizations in Syria due to both domestic security concerns and

the threat these groups might pose to the Assad regime.

## Assumptions of the Current Environment

This report's analyses and recommendations are premised on the following assumptions about the present and near-future circumstances of Syria and the region:

1. **No foreign countries will significantly escalate militarily in Syria.** No Western country has indicated it plans to lead an anti-Assad military coalition. Russia and Iran appear satisfied with the status quo, ostensibly preferring to broker an international political solution rather than send thousands more troops to help Assad regain territorial integrity by force. Although Saudi Arabia has indicated it may ratchet up pressure on Iran in Syria, the proxy war with Iran in Yemen consumes a large share of Saudi resources and attention. Israel will continue and may intensify its bombing campaign against Iranian positions, but it would only invade Syria as a last resort.
2. **Assad's position is secure.** Russia sees no alternative to Assad, and its intervention entrenched the regime in Damascus for the near future. The United States and its allies are unwilling to impose regime change by force. Moreover, as long as the Syrian opposition remains divided and outgunned, it is unlikely to present a viable governing alternative.
3. **Russia will not relinquish its core interests in Syria.** Russia intervened militarily in Syria in 2015 primarily to ensure the regime did not fall, which appeared imminent at the time. Its secondary interests were to preserve its naval facility in Tartus and air base in Latakia, and to reestablish Russia as a power broker by securing a central role in the Syrian political process. Now that Moscow has achieved these objectives and effectively sidelined the United States, it is unlikely to concede or compromise on its core interests.
4. **Iran will continue to consolidate its presence in Syria.** Like Russia, Iran has attained many of its goals there and is well-positioned to maintain if not deepen its foothold. Though some participants in recent protests in Iran have signaled opposition to Iran's foreign military operations,<sup>9</sup> we do not anticipate that Iran will change its policy for the foreseeable future.
5. **Israel will continue to protest and retaliate militarily against violations of its red lines.** The red lines include violations of territorial sovereignty, Hezbollah rearmament through Syria, and Iranian military presence in Syria. Israel will also continue to press for a buffer zone between its border and Iran-backed militias.
6. **The United States will not withdraw its military from Iraq.** Although it is unclear what the exact U.S. military presence in Iraq will be following the defeat of ISIS, the United States will likely draw down its presence, but maintain personnel and basing in the country to guard against a resurgence of violent extremism.
7. **Low oil prices will foster non-traditional partnerships.** Russia's cooperation with OPEC stemmed from a mutual need to bolster global oil markets and has pushed Russia into relationships with countries considered within the sphere of U.S. influence, particularly Saudi Arabia. Russia has also pursued new business deals with several countries through state-owned energy companies, effectively extending the reach of Russian geopolitical influence and exposure.

## GOAL 1: REASSERT U.S. LEADERSHIP AND CREDIBILITY



*U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis reviews troops with Turkish Minister of Defense Nurettin Canikli in Ankara, Turkey, August 2017. (Photo courtesy U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Turkey)*

**T**he United States has few inroads to shape the near-term future of Syria. Meanwhile, it must grapple with a growing Russian presence in the Middle East that aims to revise America's regional role.

Yet rather than attempt to reassert its regional standing by robustly engaging in Syria at this juncture—which could provoke Russian and Iranian retaliation—or returning to the Cold War strategy of ideological containment at large, America should adopt a targeted and asymmetric approach to counterbalancing Russian influence in the region in order to reassert U.S. leadership and credibility. American diplomatic leadership in the Middle East continues to be crucial to the long-term political development of the region and the stability of global energy flows. This should involve shoring up U.S. relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt, and blocking Russian efforts to use arms and nuclear energy sales to woo America's traditional Middle Eastern allies.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to advancing the U.S. national interest in maintaining a diplomatic, military, and economic foothold in the region, such a strategy will strengthen America's critical relationships and subsequent position to contain an eventual resurgence of civil war in Syria, a scenario that is likely to occur if President Assad remains in power. Thus, it has the benefits of meeting the Trump administration's objective of avoiding shouldering the Syrian burden in the immediate future while adopting a strategic approach that refrains from antagonizing Russia and helps the United States recover slipping ground in the long-term.

### OBJECTIVE

- ❖ Roll back Russian courtship of—and strengthen U.S. ties to—traditional U.S. allies



## Turkey

A long-standing member of NATO, Turkey no longer looks like either a staunch Western ally or a nation becoming more democratic. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Putin have ostensibly repaired a frosty relationship following the Turkish downing of a Russian warplane in 2015;<sup>11</sup> Erdogan has taken measures to destabilize domestic Turkish democratic institutions; and the ongoing Astana talks regarding a possible way forward in Syria have all but left the United States in the dark. Turkey is an important player in current Middle East politics, both geographically and politically.

President Barack Obama and President Erdogan's relationship began to deteriorate when Erdogan moved Turkey away from liberal democracy and the United States continued to support Syrian Kurdish forces as a legitimate force against ISIS. In July 2016, the White House response to the "attempted coup" in Turkey by military leaders, though supportive, was markedly distant, and Turkey noticed.<sup>12</sup> Another point of tension is the U.S. trial of Turkish banker Mehmet Hakan Atilla in New York, who has been convicted of helping Iran avoid sanctions.<sup>13</sup>

In January 2017, prior to the beginning of the Astana talks, Ankara made clear that it was no longer wedded to its previous stance that the future of Syria was dependent on Assad's departure from office. The United States has two disclosed military bases in Turkey at Incirlik Air Base and Izmir Air Base. Additionally, NATO's two-star Allied Land Forces Command is in Izmir and nominally responsible for land operations in the event of a large-scale NATO military engagement.<sup>14</sup> Ankara continues to argue that U.S. support to the PYD, a group considered to be a terrorist organization by the Turkish government, in U.S. efforts against ISIS in Syria is a direct security threat to Turkey.<sup>15</sup> Turkey's stance on regional Kurdish independence movements is a cornerstone of its domestic and foreign policy.

The Astana talks, led by Russia and including Turkey and Iran, focus on stabilization and conclusion of the

Syria conflict. They are today the stage for dialogue in the region. Without an official seat at the table, the United States has been isolated from these conversations, a further indicator of Turkish movement away from NATO. In September 2017, Ankara signed a deal to purchase Russia's advanced anti-aircraft missile system, the S-400/SA-21. NATO allies pressured Ankara to not follow through on the purchase as the system will not be interoperable with NATO systems.<sup>16</sup> President Erdogan has accused the EU of denying membership to Turkey because its population is majority Muslim.<sup>17</sup> The Turks say that they tried to meet EU requirements for many years, only to have new requirements added to the list. President Erdogan's July 2017 dismissal of potential membership is likely evidence of bitterness rather than an accurate portrayal of his feelings towards the union.

The primary U.S. interest in Turkey is maintaining its stability as a large regional actor with the capacity to serve as a stopgap or permissive conduit for a large number of refugees and migrants, as well as providing either regional support or dissent for U.S. interests in more volatile nations (e.g. Syria and Iraq). Russia's interest in Turkey, while providing some tangible economic benefits (e.g. S-400 sale and TurkStream pipeline), consists more in leveraging the relationship to drive a wedge between Turkey and NATO, diminish U.S. regional influence, and secure Russia's foothold in Syria.

### Engagement Priorities

1. **Leverage Turkey's membership in NATO.** While President Erdogan continues to reach out positively to Russia, Turkish membership in NATO should not be underestimated as a point of leverage. Turkey gains considerable protection and security benefits from alliance membership. Withdrawal of U.S. military personnel and LANDCOM headquarters would have negative consequences for Turkey. These options should not be threatened outright, but rather used as possible discussion points in negotiation.

2. **Maintain strong mil-to-mil and diplomatic ties with the Turkish state apparatus.** Continuing joint exercises and strong diplomatic relationships will ensure that in the event Turkey becomes more unstable, the United States will have insight and possibly influence on what happens on the ground.

## Saudi Arabia

Traditionally, Moscow has been unable to rupture the close relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, but King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's October visit to Russia and agreement to buy Russian S-400 air defense systems is evidence the tide may be turning. Several possible explanations underlie these warming ties. Saudi Arabia has grown increasingly disenchanted with the U.S. approach to Iran (especially in the Obama administration) and the Syrian civil war. The Saudis were particularly disappointed by President Obama's failure to follow through on the red line regarding the use of chemical weapons and his overemphasis on combating ISIS at the expense of pursuing a political solution.<sup>18</sup>

The ambiguity that characterizes the American approach to the conflict has led Arab allies to question the reliability of their U.S. partner, driving them closer to Russia and its clear agenda. Russia has a track record of filling vacuums left by the United States.<sup>19</sup> As President Putin seeks ways to regain Russia's international credibility and generate exploitable rifts between America and others, Saudi Arabia is a prime target for Moscow's strategic agenda.

Saudi Arabia opposes the JCPOA and viewed U.S. easing of economic sanctions as *carte blanche* for Iran to stoke regional tensions and acquire a nuclear weapon. Although Russia was also involved in negotiations with Iran, Saudi Arabia likely perceived Moscow's involvement as less of a direct slight. Deeper energy and investment ties with Russia yields economic diversification advantages for Saudi Arabia, potentially mitigating its dependence on the United States. At a time when international outrage against the Saudi-led coalition's indiscriminate

bombing campaign in Yemen could jeopardize future support, King Salman may be hedging his bets.

Although ultimately a Saudi defection into the Russian sphere is highly unlikely because Russia's ties with Iran are strong, recent developments indicate the U.S.-Saudi relationship is not airtight. Policymakers should consider the following steps for boosting ties with Saudi Arabia while repairing America's preeminence as a partner over Russia.

### Engagement Priorities

1. **Present a strong, consistent message that Washington is committed to remaining actively engaged in the Middle East.** If the United States wishes to maintain its influence and alliances, it needs to remain active in the region. Passivity directly plays into Russia's short-term and long-term goals, as it weakens American capabilities in the region while strengthening Russia's image as a world power.
2. **Assure the Saudi crown of U.S. support for the Kingdom and its allies and emphasize the warming relationship between Russia and Iran as a reminder that Saudi Arabia should avoid getting too close to President Putin.** Although King Salman would be pleased were the United States to announce it will decertify the JCPOA, President Trump's administration should explain that in the spirit of consistency, the United States must continue to uphold the deal to retain its international credibility. U.S. diplomats should also note to Saudi counterparts that President Putin has more to gain by working through Iran in Syria than by strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia.
3. **Serve as a moderating force on Saudi Arabia for its actions in Lebanon and Yemen.** Although staying in the JCPOA will likely inspire Saudi-Iranian relations to fester, the United States should diplomatically caution restraint, while continuing to offer financial and material support. Criticism that is too harsh may push Saudi Arabia out of Washington's orbit, but



advising Saudi Arabia to work to resolve the conflicts could yield benefits for regional stability and guard against the development of vulnerabilities Russia could exploit.

## Israel

Russian observers boast that Russia-Israel relations are closer than ever before. Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin meet and speak frequently, and milestones of Israel-Russia rapprochement under their governance include the 2010 commencement of arms sales from Israel to Russia<sup>20</sup> and the October 2017 trip to Israel by Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu.<sup>21</sup> Moscow and Tel Aviv are in close contact about Syria, including maintaining military deconfliction channels so Israeli operations there do not accidentally clash with Russian forces.

However, the reason Israel and Russia talk so much is that the Russian intervention in Syria has bolstered Iran and Hezbollah's presence there, exacerbating a security risk for Israel. Moreover, if this risk were to metastasize into war, Russia would most likely stay on the sidelines rather than stand with Israel. Thus, in terms of shared interests, the United States is clearly superior to Russia as a security partner.

The United States should take affirmative steps towards the Palestinians regarding Jerusalem so as to offset the diplomatic damage done by the unilateral U.S. declaration favoring Israel's position. Russia can capitalize on the resulting alienation, just as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. Moreover, the resultant popular and governmental backlash within the region could make Israel itself less secure.

## Engagement Priorities

1. **Signal security assurances to Israel to deter Iranian belligerence.** Do not oppose Israel's military strikes within Syria, provided they are not so brazen as to threaten regional security. Other measures include supporting Israel rhetorically in its demands for distance between its border and

Iranian forces and militias, and advertising bilateral military exercises and intelligence-sharing. This could deter Iranian operations and underscore that while Russia can talk to Israel about Iran, the United States is far more willing to help Israel do something about it.

2. **Mediate Israel-Saudi talks on Syria.** Israel has publicly welcomed Saudi involvement in the crisis, but open coordination with Israel risks alienating Saudi Arabia from its own citizens and other Arab states. The United States can mediate back-channel talks, allowing it to serve as a moderating force if necessary.
3. **Increase military and intelligence cooperation with Israel on preventing smuggling of seaborne weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas.**
4. **Hold the line on U.S. policy respecting the Golan Heights.** Although Prime Minister Netanyahu has previously suggested the United States recognize Israeli sovereignty over this occupied territory, doing so would contradict longstanding U.S. policy and UNSCR 242, 338, and 479. Further, it would imperil American standing with regional partners as well as the administration's Israel-Palestine peace plan.

## Iraq

Although Russia may wish to boost its posture in the Middle East, it is unlikely play a pivotal role in Iraq. While the country is not likely to become grounds for competition between the United States and Russia, policymakers must not take that probability for granted. Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi welcomed Russian airstrikes in Syria in 2015 and engaged in joint intelligence sharing with Russia to combat ISIS. Moreover, former Iraqi Prime Minister and current Vice President al-Maliki has visited Moscow and expressed a desire for a larger Russian influence in the region, particularly with regard to economic relations. These overtures, in part inspired by the opportunity for energy trade with Russia, may also reflect past scarring from America's departure from Iraq in 2011.

This departure, some argue, gave rise to the Islamic State.

### Engagement Priorities

1. **Focus diplomatic effort on supporting political reconciliation.** Political stability in Iraq is pivotal for stabilizing the country and the region as a whole, and failing to secure Iraq a second time will hurt American credibility and provide Russia with propaganda fodder. Military objectives have taken primacy over political engagement for years, and as kinetic operations draw down, the United States must avoid past mistakes and help Iraqis permanently strengthen their national resilience.
2. **Keep U.S. forces in Iraq for the next three years before reassessing.** This will not only guard against an ISIS resurgence, but also stand as a counterweight to expanding Iranian influence and visibly signal American commitment to the country.

## Jordan

Jordan has enjoyed friendly relations with Washington since the Eisenhower administration and today is a major non-NATO ally, an important player in maintaining peace with Israel, and a critical partner in the coalition fighting ISIS. However, Moscow has also enjoyed a warm relationship with Jordan and has sold King Abdullah nuclear energy and weapons for years, dating back to before the Syrian civil war. Recently, Jordan's proximity to Syria has prompted King Abdullah to closely and frequently coordinate with the Putin regime. As Moscow explores opportunities for undercutting U.S. influence in Syria and the region, it is critical that Washington not take Jordan's reliability for granted, and refrain from steps that might alienate the Hashemite Kingdom.

### Engagement Priorities

1. **Indefinitely postpone moving the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.** By announcing that it will move its embassy in Israel

to Jerusalem, the United States has provoked a backlash across the Muslim world against Washington, generating diplomatic rifts for Russia to exploit. To avoid further widening those divisions, the United States should indefinitely delay opening the embassy in Jerusalem. This issue is particularly sensitive for Jordan, which serves as the custodian of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third-holiest site in Islam. Moving the embassy will hinder constructive relations with one of the United States' most crucial allies in the Middle East.

2. **Maintain the current level of bilateral assistance to Jordan, including substantial security-related aid as well as aid aimed at refugee integration and economic development.** The United States has stepped up assistance to Jordan as part of the anti-ISIS campaign.<sup>22</sup> This higher level of assistance should continue beyond the defeat of ISIS in order to secure Jordan against enduring unrest in Syria as well as to ensure that Jordan does not turn to Russia for its security needs.
3. **Rally Jordanian support for the Geneva process.** Jordan has been an active participant in the Astana process, with particular focus on de-escalation in southern Syria.<sup>23</sup> The United States should impress upon Jordan that Geneva remains the most legitimate forum to achieve lasting stability on Jordan's northern border, and that Jordan should use its seat at the table in Astana to limit the scope of those discussions to operational issues and to join with Turkey in funneling political discussions toward Geneva.

## Egypt

A steadfast American ally since Anwar Sadat's presidency, Egypt has experienced political turmoil following the 2011 Arab Spring revolution. Despite President Trump's enthusiasm for authoritarian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the U.S. attempt to reinvigorate a relationship that was strained under President Obama has proven insufficient to disrupt

Putin's allure. In addition to rumors that Russia plans to help Egypt develop its natural gas sector and sell the country nuclear energy, the two countries have also recently negotiated a deal allowing Russia to use Egyptian bases for its warplanes. This is potentially a response to the Trump administration's decision to downsize the U.S. foreign aid budget. More likely, however, it is a follow-on from President Obama's decision to suspend some security aid to Egypt due to its human rights violations in 2013, which prompted el-Sisi's visit to Moscow. The Egyptian leader's look to Russia could jeopardize a decades-old alliance between the United States and one of its most reliable Arab partners in the Middle East.

Given that the United States has a strong defense relationship with Egypt, needs Egypt as a staunch partner in countering terrorism, and relies on Egypt to maintain the peace treaty with Israel, policymakers should reconsider how to maintain a strong and enduring American commitment to Egypt.

### Engagement Priorities

1. **Warn Egypt that their decision to allow Russia to use its bases undermines the U.S.-Egyptian defense relationship.** The agreement poses a challenge for the use of Egyptian airspace and increases the potential for United States and Russian planes to conflict. Despite nascent overtures to Russia, Egypt cannot afford to lose U.S. military support, as Russia is not wealthy enough to replace it. Thus, American policymakers retain some leverage in this area.
2. **Continue to press Egypt to make significant reforms on human rights with positive, not punitive reinforcement.** Human rights abuses have worsened under el-Sisi and according to some, have become even more prolific than under Hosni Mubarak. As a matter of principle, the United States must still engage Egypt regarding its suppression of journalists and civil society. However, America must tread carefully, as excessively public condemnations are likely to do more harm than good. The United States should privately incentivize Egypt to ease its abusive tendencies through promises of further economic and military aid contingent on much-needed reforms that safeguard freedom of expression, assembly, and due process, and allow NGOs to operate freely.



*Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Cairo, December 2017. (Photo courtesy President of Russia)*

## Policy Recommendations

### 1) Reinforce military-to-military ties.

The United States' credibility as a security guarantor is crucial to its diplomatic strength. To dispel perceptions of U.S. withdrawal from the region or Russian plans to take advantage of an ensuing power vacuum, the United States should reassure its allies that it stands behind them. The U.S. military's actions should be coordinated with its diplomatic strategy. Examples of such policies include:

- Conducting more military exercises with Turkey and Egypt
- Stepping up domestic security cooperation with Jordan and Iraq in response to Iran's increased presence in Syria

### POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is a politically delicate time to strengthen security cooperation with a number of U.S. regional partners. Turkey's democratic backsliding, Egypt's authoritarian consolidation, and Saudi Arabia's dismal human rights record make them unpalatable beneficiaries of American largesse. Many will ask why the United States would entrench itself further into such troubled partnerships. The problem is that when the United States withdraws its security support, Russia fills the void with arms and energy deals. By turning away from those partners now, the United States may absolve itself of some complicity in those countries' problematic practices, but it will cede regional influence to a power that has no intention of ever using its clout in a "values-positive" way. It is precisely the United States' security commitments that give it the standing and leverage to promote liberal values in the region over the long term.

Policymakers should also remind the public that cooperation with regional partners increases the operational flexibility and reach of the U.S. military, citing examples from the Gulf War and campaigns against al-Qaeda and ISIS, to correct the misperception that America can "go it alone" and still maintain the same level of security. Other potential

talking points are that Russian influence over Turkey could compromise NATO, and that U.S. partnerships with Middle Eastern states make Israel and Europe safer.

### 2) Commit to recognize the future Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem.

U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital has rattled America's other regional allies and made cooperation with the United States a heavier lift for them in domestic politics. Iran can use the United States announcement on Jerusalem for anti-U.S. propaganda. A reciprocal move for the Palestinians could reassure regional allies and burnish the U.S. claim to trustworthiness as a mediator.

### POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Committing to recognize East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state would send shockwaves through both the domestic and international political arenas. Israeli leadership and pro-Israel constituencies in the United States will strongly oppose the move. They will also accuse the United States of unilaterally setting the terms of a peace deal that should be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The response is that the East Jerusalem declaration would be no more of a departure than recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital was, given the city's disputed status.

Although we acknowledge the likely domestic unpopularity of our proposed policy and need for caution and sensitivity in implementing it, we believe the benefits to the United States' credibility in the Middle East and the world would more than justify the political risk. Perception of the United States as an impartial mediator of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides the United States with international authority and American partners supportive of the Palestinian cause with political justification for cooperation with the United States. Following the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, however, America's status as mediator is gravely imperiled. For the Palestinians to trust the United States as a mediator, the United



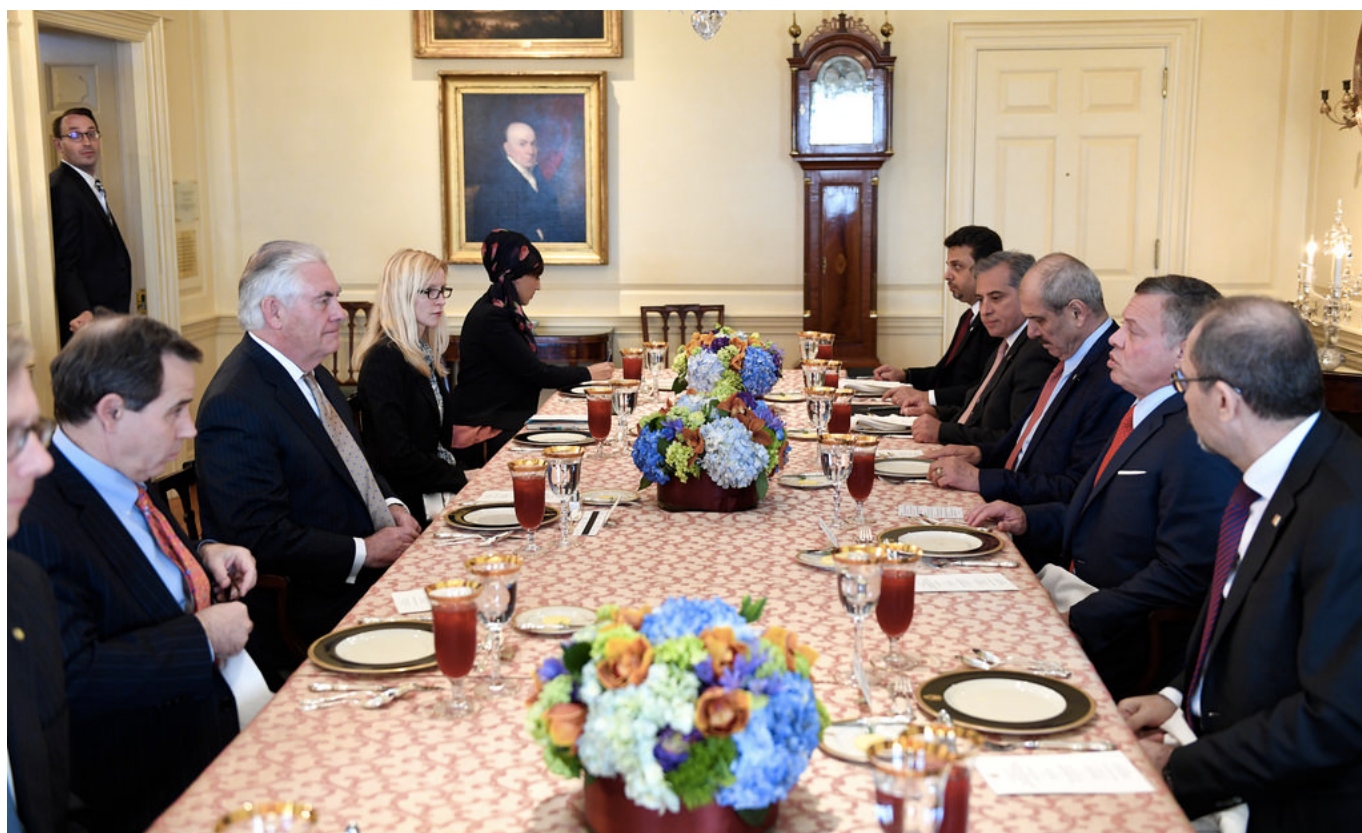
States must give them a gesture reciprocal to the one it just gave to Israel. Should the United States succeed in eventually brokering a peace settlement, it would reap the dividends of a more peaceful Middle East and weaken the anti-U.S. propaganda of Iran and terrorist organizations. Failing to confer recognition of East Jerusalem, however, would foreclose the possibility that the United States would have any role in or receive any credit for such an accomplishment. Policymakers should emphasize to the public the importance of this policy to preserving the peace process and reinforcing America's regional and international leadership.

### **3) Fill ambassadorships in the region and senior positions in the State Department.**

Increasing Department of State capacity is critical to diplomatically engaging with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt. There are currently nine key vacant positions in the region: Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Sudan, Turkey, UN / Geneva,

UN / Human Rights Council, and EU. While the State Department undergoes reorganization, it should build capacity and dedicate resources to make diplomacy with critical countries as effective as possible. To have a proactive rather than a reactive role in the region, the United States needs more diplomatic capacity than it has now. Relevant priorities include:

- Leading a multilateral Israel-Palestine peace process
- Restoring Geneva as the primary forum for the Syrian political settlement
- Supporting political reconciliation and strengthening local and national governance institutions in Iraq to prevent the revival of ISIS
- Coordinating talks between allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia
- Condemning Turkey's and Egypt's arms and base-sharing deals with Russia while assuring them of U.S. credibility as a security guarantor
- Helping Jordan to prosper economically and maintain its domestic security



*U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and King Abdullah II of Jordan participate in a working luncheon in Washington, D.C., April 2017 (Photo courtesy U.S. Department of State)*



## GOAL 2: SYRIA ON THE GROUND AND THE PEACE PROCESS

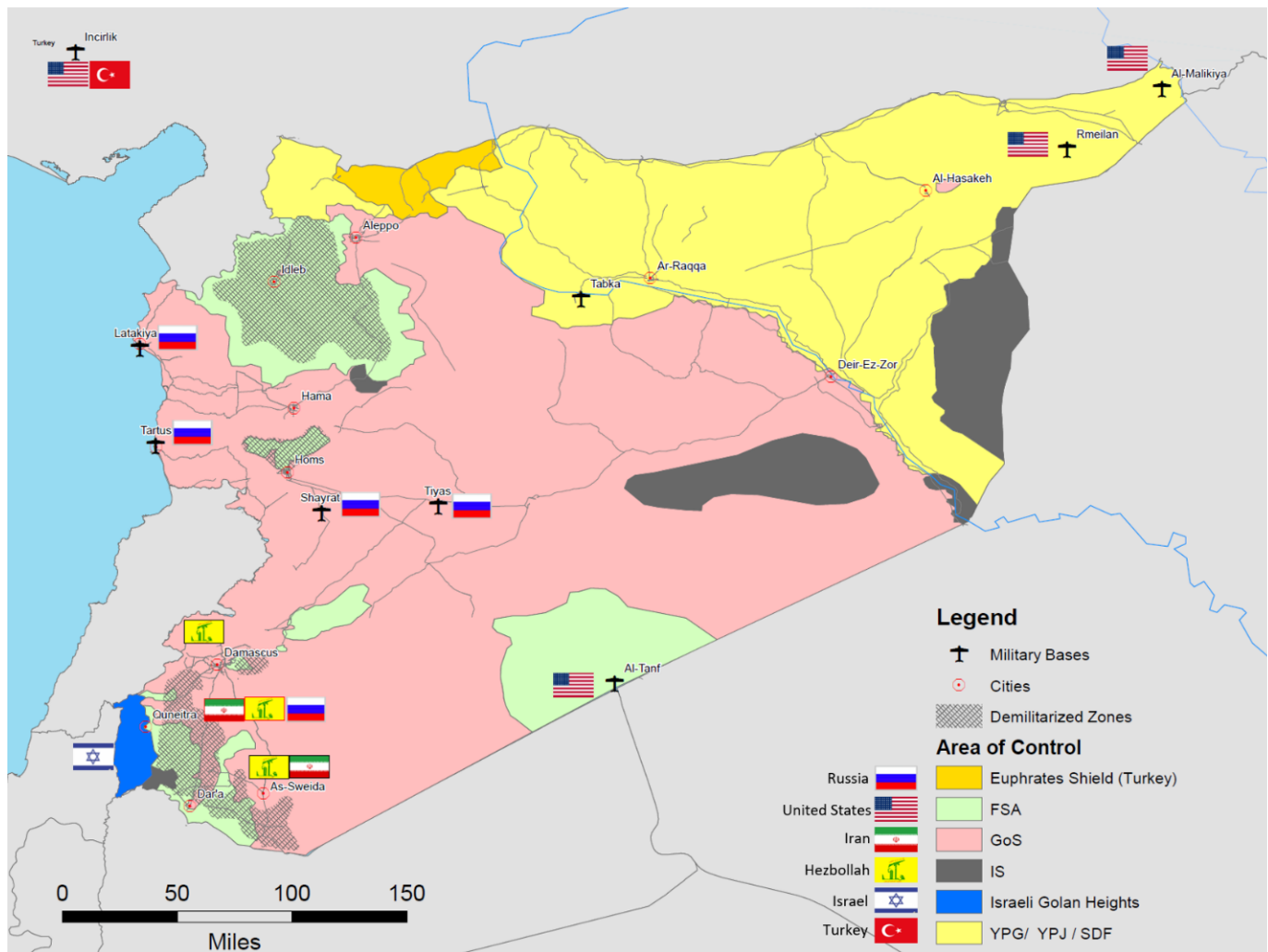


Fig. 1: Map of territorial control and locations of key actors in Syria as of January 14, 2018. (Created by Kent Troutman)

Russia and the Assad regime have demonstrated greater resolve than the United States to shape realities on the ground in Syria. Besides having more tangible interests in Syria proper, Russia sees its international image as linked to its leadership of the political settlement of the Syrian crisis. The United States has proven it is not willing to substantially increase or prolong its troop presence over the long term in Syria, and the position shared by the opposition and the United States that Assad must go is no longer a tenable starting position for peace negotiations. The Assad regime has signaled a willingness to forego EU or U.S. funds for

reconstruction if those funds are conditioned on political concessions. Figure 1 above shows areas of territorial control and locations of key actors in Syria at the time of this report's publication.

Meanwhile, the United States has at least 2,000 servicemembers on the ground in Syria, continues to support certain opposition groups in countering ISIS, and has been and will be invested in the Geneva peace process for Syria. This military and diplomatic presence, as well as the U.S. commitments to human rights, long-term regional stability, and supporting its EU allies in handling the refugee crisis, will require U.S. policymakers to take positions in several areas of

potential cooperation, competition and conflict with Russia.

Our research leads us to believe the United States still has key interests in the stability of Syria, but few policy options remain and none of them are easy or ideal. Russia intends to use Astana to achieve a political solution that advances its interests. Any such political solution reached at Astana will inevitably lead to further conflict and undermine key U.S. interests in the medium- and long-term. The first key objective is to prevent power vacuums, which create space for the resurgence of ISIS and a further strengthening of al-Qaeda. The second key U.S. objective is to achieve an inclusive political agreement leading to stability in Syria. This must include reform of the security state and the judiciary and the eventual departure of Assad.

### OBJECTIVES

- ❖ Prevent ISIS and al-Qaeda resurgence
- ❖ Advocate inclusive political transition

## The Syria Peace Process

Russia aims to show its leadership on the world stage by taking a central role in the Syrian peace process. However, the United States and Russia do not agree on an acceptable endgame for Syria. Russia does not share the United States' interest in holding the Assad regime accountable for human rights violations, nor does it consider a genuinely representative Syrian government key to regional stability. The United States must renew its diplomatic partnerships in the region not only to counter Russian diplomatic influence, but also to re-energize regional support for an inclusive Syrian political transition centered at Geneva. Diplomatic creativity and pressure will be necessary for addressing the following key issues within the peace process:

- **Geneva process grounded in the Geneva Communique and UNSCR 2254:** The Geneva process remains the best forum in which to reach

a peace agreement with the support of the international community.

- The United States must stand firm on guarantees of human rights and protection for opposition leaders within this process. The United States should base the Geneva process on accountability to the commitments made in the Geneva Communique and UNSCR 2254, which remain the foundational documents guiding the political settlement of the Syrian crisis. This includes naming how Russia is violating Section 13 of UNSCR 2254 by using barrel bombs and indiscriminately attacking civilians, and holding the line on human rights principles and basic guarantees of protection for opposition leaders.
- U.S. advocacy will be vital in order to gain agreement on allowing humanitarian aid and credible UN or ICRC monitors to enter besieged communities, as well as other issues such as detainee release and transitional justice.
- The United States should keep up pressure on Russia to put forward a plan in the UNSC for investigating chemical weapons attacks in Syria.
- The United States should leverage its established, though frayed, relationship with Turkey and a mutual interest in keeping the Astana talks focused on military deconfliction as a way to bolster the role of Geneva as the legitimate process for political resolution.
- **Future of Assad:** After six years of "Assad must go" as the official U.S. position, U.S. diplomacy will be key to convincing the Syrian opposition that it must be unified and realistic in generating options for a clear and time-bound plan for a face-saving exit for Assad.

- **Astana process and the Sochi conference:** Russia has worked with Iran and Turkey to organize several rounds of talks in Astana, which have led to limited ceasefires and de-escalation zones, and is now planning a major conference in Sochi with the goal of gaining agreement on a new constitution. Although these talks have achieved some limited accomplishments, they are not attended by all of the legitimate opposition leaders and threaten the possibility of more representative talks in Geneva. The United States should remind Russia that it is violating the “credible, inclusive” requirement of operative paragraph 4 of UNSCR 2254.

## Stabilization or Reconstruction?

Rebuilding Syria is likely to cost at least \$300 billion and take more than 20 years. For the EU and United

States, reconstruction funding has been discussed as one of the last concrete potential leverage points in shaping the political outcomes of the war.<sup>24</sup> However, the Assad government has stated that it will not concede politically what it deems it has won militarily.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore not interested in reconstruction aid with strings attached.<sup>26</sup> By refusing to fund or shape reconstruction, however, the United States would contribute to a deepening of humanitarian suffering and economic inequalities, while empowering the sectarian rifts contributing to the conflict, leading to a potential resurgence of violence in the future. To mitigate this, the United States should consider funding “Humanitarian Plus” initiatives (lifesaving stabilization and minimal reconstruction) in former ISIS-held areas such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzour, as well as the other areas controlled or supported by the United States and its allies Turkey and Jordan.



Salaheddine District in Aleppo, November 2012. (Photo courtesy Syria Freedom)



Since 2012, the United States, European Union, and United Kingdom have collectively given billions of dollars in humanitarian and political non-military aid to partners working outside the purview of the regime and Damascus.<sup>27</sup> These NGOs and UN agencies have developed robust systems for program implementation and monitoring across Syria's borders. Approximately 50 percent of the annual humanitarian budgets was also given to the UN for support of Damascus-based interventions in regime-controlled areas, with questionable results.<sup>28</sup> This model should continue, and should be scaled up with a focus on Humanitarian Plus initiatives to restore basic shelter, electricity, safe water delivery infrastructure, essential medical services and primary education. By doing so, the United States and its allies can demonstrate what early recovery could look like following a future viable peace agreement, while stabilizing the humanitarian and political situation in those areas remaining under United States influence to some degree.

## Counterterrorism

Both the United States and Russia want to prevent the Syrian conflict from triggering terrorist acts on their respective homelands. However, cooperation on counterterrorism has proven elusive. Though counterterrorism is a primary goal of the United States in Syria, it is a secondary goal for Russia, which has instead prioritized strengthening the Assad regime. The conflict is one of strategic priorities and of definitions: the United States and Russia define terrorist groups differently and have accordingly supported or targeted different groups. The United States has targeted ISIS and select al-Qaeda affiliates, whereas Russia and the Assad regime generally consider members of the opposition and their local supporters to be terrorists. More than 90 percent of Russia's bombing campaigns have been directed at members of the opposition, decimating entire cities such as Aleppo and Idlib, whereas minimal attention has been paid to bombing ISIS targets. Since the United States and Russia define terrorist groups differently, and since both sets of definitions

sometimes serve political purposes, it is unlikely that further engagement with Russia on this topic will yield progress.

## The Syrian Kurds

Syrian Kurds have emerged as a key party in the Syrian conflict. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have proven to be a highly capable military force and partner for the U.S.-led counter-ISIS campaign in Syria. The SDF now controls most of Syrian territory east of the Euphrates River, encompassing a number of prized oil fields and extending far beyond the traditional Kurdish enclaves along Syria's northern border. A range of prominent voices have advocated robust U.S. support for the PYD, the Kurdish party that leads the SDF, and its military wing, the YPG.

U.S. support for the PYD is fraught for two main reasons. First, it alienates Turkey, an already troubled ally which views the PYD as a terrorist organization that is indistinguishable from the PKK. The PYD was indeed founded by former PKK members, but the United States, though it designates the PKK as a terrorist group, does not do the same for the PYD. Given its size, geography, and historical alliance with the United States, Turkey is a far more valuable strategic asset to the United States than PYD-held parts of Syria. Second, PYD governance is both fragile and problematic. The PYD's alleged abuses of non-Arab populations under its rule include forced military conscription and residential displacement.<sup>29</sup> Its ideological bent, which follows the teachings of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, has alienated even fellow Kurds who have chafed at the PYD's attempts to teach its ideology in Kurdish schools.<sup>30</sup> Sunni Arab tribes may yet turn to extremist groups to resist PYD rule as they did in the rebellion against Assad.

For these reasons, we advise against deepening U.S. support for the PYD, especially after the fall of ISIS. The PYD has neither the legitimacy to govern non-Kurdish populations, nor the authority to speak as the representative voice of the Syrian Kurds. A robust U.S.-PYD partnership in Syria, though effective as a

counterterrorism force in the short run, could in the long run pit the United States against local populations in eastern Syria who are the primary bulwark against a resurgence of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

## Policy Recommendations

### **1) Keep the 2,000 U.S. service members in Syria for at least the next year to continue to degrade ISIS and prevent its return.**

We recommend military units be kept in place until January 2019 and then adjusted based on a reassessment of conditions on the ground.

In addition to force presence, the United States could restart a Presidential Commission to generate resource-light initiatives for dialogue and cooperation. The United States could also assist and encourage Jordan to revisit the task of producing a definitive list of terrorist groups and mediate talks between the United States and Russia to forge common understanding. While the United States and Russia are unlikely to make progress in counterterrorism coordination, the United States could revive the U.S.-Russia Counterterrorism Working Group.

#### **POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

U.S. public support for long-term ground troop deployments abroad continues to be weak. Extending the stay of U.S. troops in Syria will no doubt raise concerns of open-ended deployments and unending mandates. Keeping this deployment small (no more than the 2,000 troops currently acknowledged to be in Syria) and its mission narrowly defined to counterterrorism operations will mitigate these concerns.

### **2) Fund Humanitarian Plus initiatives aimed at stabilizing the humanitarian situation and strengthening local governance and civil society actors through the strong network of NGO partners the United States has been relying on for the past six years.**

In particular, the United States should consider an immediate and substantial contribution in partnership with the Government of Turkey to improve services in the Euphrates Shield Zone. This will also have an immediate effect of warming U.S.-Turkey relations while piloting the possibility of expanding similar models in Daraa, Idlib and Deir Ezzour. Humanitarian Plus focuses aid on security, water, food, health and shelter. It is not reconstruction, but rather survival and stability.

The United States should contribute to lifesaving and stabilization efforts in opposition-controlled areas, bypassing the Assad regime. It should allocate significant additional resources for Humanitarian Plus initiatives, prioritizing the following areas:

- **Daraa:** This is the U.S.-Jordanian de-escalation zone agreed upon with Russia. The United States has assumed responsibility as a guarantor for this area.
- **Al Bab-Jarablus:** Turkey has controlled this area since early 2014, when Turkish Armed Forces liberated the area from ISIS. Support to this area in collaboration with already-established USG partners and the Government of Turkey serves two purposes: potential improvement in U.S.-Turkey relations and urgent support for the remaining moderate opposition holding the area. Reports suggest more than 160,000 refugees and IDPs have returned to Al Bab, but essential services have yet to be established.
- **Deir Ezzour:** The Sunni Arab tribes of eastern Syria are the best hope of preventing the return of ISIS or al-Qaeda. If villages are controlled by Kurdish groups, Syrian government forces, or Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias, the tribes will likely turn to radical militant groups to maintain local control.

#### **POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The Humanitarian Plus initiatives will require appropriations from Congress. In a domestic political environment that is skeptical of U.S. aid spending abroad, political messaging on these initiatives must



avoid any connotations of “nation-building” or “reconstruction.” Rather, they should be presented as integral to the campaign to defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda and prevent their resurgence. Confining Humanitarian Plus initiatives to a limited scope and emphasizing their counterterrorism value will maximize political viability.

### **3) Bolster Geneva talks as the only legitimate peace process, grounding rhetoric in the Geneva Communique and UNSCR 2254.**

The United States should continue to send a U.S. Syria Envoy to attend Astana and Sochi meetings, but refuse to recognize any agreement unless it aligns with UNSCR 2254 and the Geneva Communique. The United States should acknowledge Russian leadership at Astana and the resulting reduction in bombing of civilian targets while strongly advocating

resumption of UN-led talks in Geneva or another venue as the legitimate forum. In support of Geneva, the United States should increase regional diplomatic efforts by prioritizing ambassadorial appointments to rally a coalition to insist on such a process.

#### **POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Reviving faith in the Geneva process will be a challenge both within the United States and around the world. A renewed regional diplomatic push will be key to this process. Internationally, Geneva must show buy-in from a broad coalition of states to wield legitimacy. Domestically, broad international buy-in would show that it will not fall solely on the United States to bring forward a solution for Syria. The United States should make clear to the public at home and abroad that Geneva remains the best hope for a peace process that fulfills the mandates of UNSCR 2254.



*A Free Syrian Army fighter takes cover during clashes with the Syrian Army in Aleppo, August 2012. (Photo courtesy Reuters)*

## GOAL 3: LIMIT IRANIAN EXPANSIONISM

The biggest beneficiary of the Syrian civil war has likely been Iran. Its military advisors and militias are now ubiquitous in regime-controlled areas; at a recent event, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster reportedly estimated that “about 80 per cent of Assad fighters are Iranian proxies in Syria to establish a land bridge over into the Mediterranean.”<sup>31</sup> This presence facilitates Iranian efforts to threaten Israel, interfere in Lebanon and Iraq, bargain with Turkey, and compete geopolitically with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt.

Iran seeks to become a hegemonic power throughout the Middle East, and particularly over the region’s Shi’ite populations. Iranian objectives conflict with U.S. allies’ priorities, and Iran’s funding of violent militias worsens regional instability. In its efforts, Iran has a willing tactical partner in Russia. The complementarity of Russian arms and international leadership positions with Iranian muscle and evangelical influence over Shi’ites presents a formidable challenge to the United States’ efforts to support its own allies and buttress regional stability.

### OBJECTIVES

- ❖ Prevent Iran-Israel war
- ❖ Mitigate the Iranian presence in Syria
- ❖ Decrease Iranian influence with allies

## Russia-Iran Cooperation

Russia and Iran have worked together to frustrate U.S. objectives in Syria. Russia cooperated with Iran and Hezbollah in saving and stabilizing the Assad regime and has included Iran in the Astana peace talks. The preservation of the Assad regime is in Iran’s interest as well as Russia’s. New leaders less beholden to these states may not have the same sense of obligation to them, and a representative democratic government may have a significantly

different policy orientation altogether. Moreover, Syria gives both countries a foothold to undermine U.S. influence in the region.

## Potential Areas of Russia-Iran Conflict

The perception that Russia has leverage over Iran bolsters Russia’s international influence. For instance, Russia has acted as Iran’s interlocutor in ceasefire talks with the United States and deconfliction talks with Israel. However, several observers we interviewed characterized Iran as a highly independent actor that is not susceptible to coercion by Russia or any other state, and portrayed Russia-Iran ties as opportunistic tactical cooperation rather than a stable strategic partnership. Therefore, Russia is likely unable to actually make Iran change its behavior. U.S. strategists should also take note of contradictions between Russian and Iranian interests. In Syria, these include the following:

- **As de facto lead negotiator on Syria’s future, Russia could cut a deal that doesn’t match Iranian priorities.** Russia has provided Iran a seat at the negotiating table in Astana, but if negotiations return to Geneva, Iran would be sidelined and progress could come at its expense.<sup>32</sup>
- **Russia and Iran may compete for influence over the Syrian government, and for energy concessions in particular.** Oil revenue could help both sides pay off their intervention costs, but the gains to be had are limited. One way to offer Russia and Iran a bigger windfall would be for the Assad regime to regain control of the rest of the country and its attendant energy resources, but the process of doing so would be violent and costly if a political solution does not expressly address these resources. Figure 2 shows locations of key energy resources in relation to areas of territorial control.

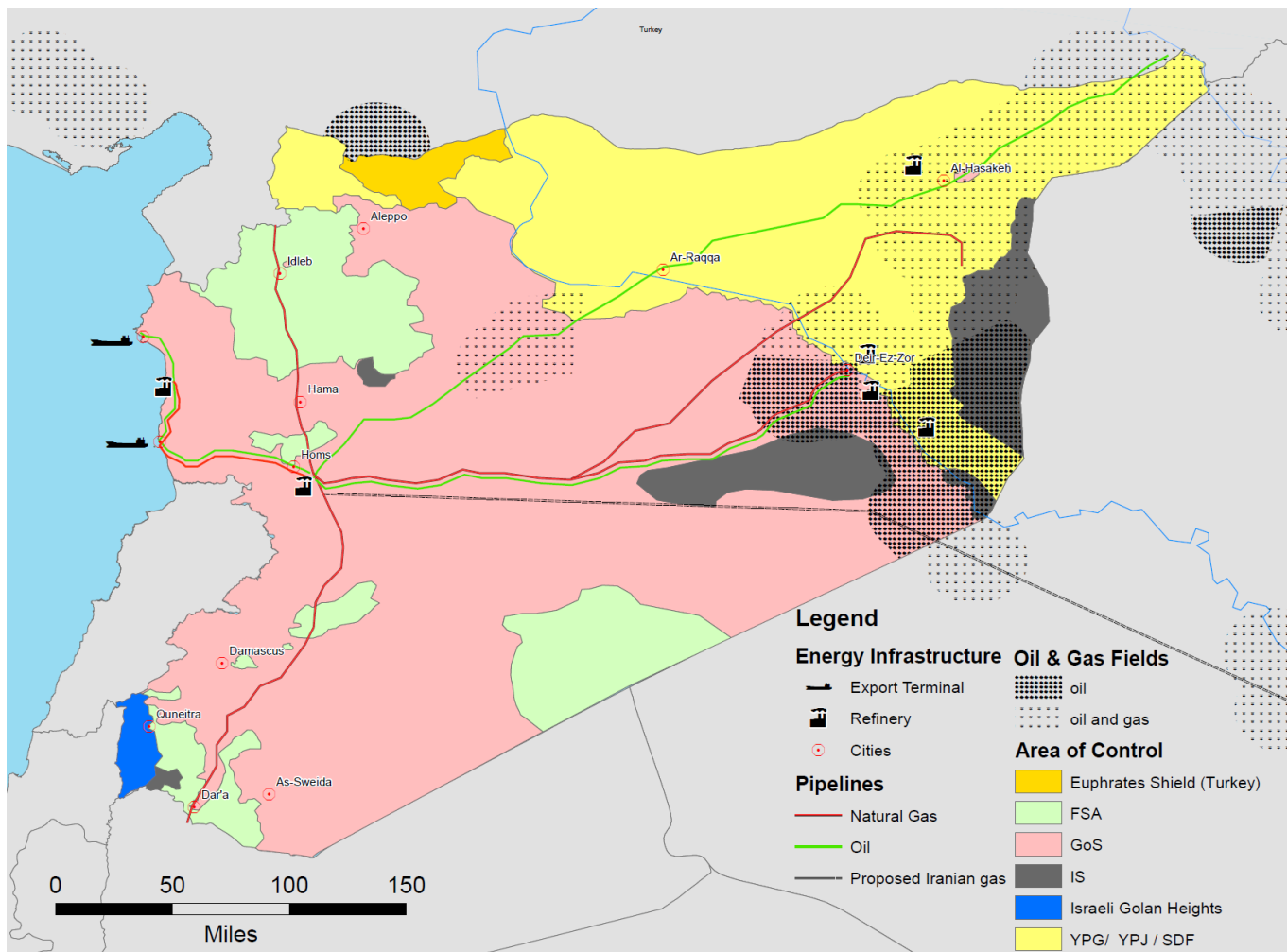


Fig. 2: Map of key energy resources and areas of territorial control as of January 14, 2018. (Created by Kent Troutman)

- **The Iranian objective of a Shi'ite crescent is not shared by Russia.** Russia professes to seek good relations with all the region's states, and overt religious sectarianism would threaten this. Russia has recently pursued closer diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, Iran's chief regional competitor. Within Syria, this could mean Russia would be more interested than Iran in Sunni representation and concerns.
- **Iranian smuggling of arms to Hezbollah via Syria strains Russian-Israeli relations.** Israel frequently attacks suspected supply points for Hezbollah within Syria,<sup>33</sup> and according to some observers these points have recently moved deeper within Syria. Although Israel and Russia have established military deconfliction channels, the

possibility of an Israeli strike that unintentionally harms Russian forces is not out of the question. In addition, Russia-Iran arms sales could be threatened if any arms Russia sold to Iran were found to have been used against Israel.

- **A war by Iran and/or its militias against Israel would put Russia in an awkward diplomatic position and could destabilize Syria.** Israel has reportedly warned that any Iranian military presence inside Syria or Iranian-backed militia presence within 60 kilometers of the Israeli border is unacceptable.<sup>34</sup> Israel also has a history of preemptive strikes to guarantee its own security. Throughout this conflict, it has bombed targets within Syria in an effort to stem weapons proliferation to Hezbollah. These targets have



apparently included some Syrian military installations,<sup>35</sup> and any Syrian intervention on Iran's behalf in such a conflict would invite Israeli retaliation. Russian observers are skeptical that Iran can be persuaded to cede its hard-won new capability to threaten Israel from both Lebanon and Syria. In light of the degree of Hezbollah and Israeli rearmament, a future war would likely be significantly bloodier and more destructive than the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict. Russia, caught between its ties to both sides, may do nothing. Given the risk of alienating one side or both, preventing war from breaking out is in the Russian interest.

The United States should find ways to create division between Iran and Russia. One such forum is the JCPOA, where the United States and Russia jointly monitor Iran's pledge not to develop nuclear weapons. The JCPOA framework allows the United States to maintain sanctions that are unrelated to Iranian nuclear weapons, including its designation of Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism and its sanctions for Iranian human rights violations. Russia's membership in the JCPOA helps legitimize that policy internationally. According to at least one observer, Russia's cooperation with the rest of the P5+1 on the pact strained Russia-Iran ties.

## The Importance of U.S. Credibility

With respect to their regional competition with the United States, although Russia and Iran are at a power disadvantage and are sometimes at cross purposes, they can take advantage of perceived U.S. inattentiveness or withdrawal. The United States should reinforce the credibility of its commitments to regional allies and multilateral agreements so as to strengthen its diplomatic threats and assurances. Namely, the United States must support the JCPOA. Abandoning it without certification that Iran has violated the agreement would render future U.S. policy less believable and constitute a propaganda victory for Russian and Iranian hardliners who argue

the United States cannot be trusted. If the rest of the P5+1 stuck with the deal, Russia would remain a monitor of Iran, but it would be quite difficult for the newly isolated United States to unite the international community against Iran again in the future.

## Policy Recommendations

### 1) Don't oppose Israeli strikes on Iranian bases in Syria (within limits).

Israel is militarily engaged in mitigating the Iranian presence in Syria<sup>36</sup> and sees its actions as preventative in nature. That said, the United States should not write Israel a blank check, and should constrain it from any destabilizing overreaches such as attacks on civilians or in urban centers.

### 2) Engage Russia on a UN Security Council Resolution for an expanded DMZ in southern Syria near the Golan Heights.

There has been a UN peacekeeper-manned demilitarized zone between Israel and Syria for decades, and prior to the Syrian civil war that border was quiet. The presence of Iran and Iranian-backed militias in southern Syria has made the situation much more dangerous.<sup>37</sup> Israel has demanded a wide buffer zone between itself and Iranian militias. It has also demanded the withdrawal of the Iranian military from Syria,<sup>38</sup> and has acknowledged retaliatory strikes against Syrian government positions in the Golan.<sup>39</sup> Iran has invested too much and is too independent to give in to Israeli demands, and Russia doesn't have the leverage to force Iran's withdrawal. However, prevention of an Iran-Israel war is also in Russia's interest, given the country's desire to maintain good relations with both countries and to keep the Assad regime stable. Hence, the United States should propose to Russia cooperation within the UNSC to significantly expand the DMZ around the Golan Heights and reduce the risk of armed conflict. During the talks, the aforementioned Israeli strikes on suspected Iranian bases would increase the sense of urgency needed to reach the deal.



## POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given ongoing investigations into Russian interference in the U.S. election and the overall poor state of the U.S.-Russia relationship, engagement of any kind with Russia will be politically sensitive, especially for the current U.S. administration. Holding negotiations within the UN Security Council framework and keeping the topic of engagement narrowly focused on establishing a DMZ constitute the best way to approach those sensitivities.

### 3) Coordinate with Israeli-Saudi talks.

Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States all have a strong interest in constraining Iran. However, because of the Palestine crisis it is difficult for Saudi Arabia to publicly cooperate with Israel. The United States can help coordinate private talks between the two sides.

### 4) Don't leave the JCPOA.

Without strong support for renegotiation from the deal's other signatories, the failure of the pact would undermine the credibility of future U.S. threats and assurances toward and with respect to Iran. U.S. withdrawal would be a propaganda coup for Iranian and

Russian hardliners who claim America cannot be trusted. Moreover, if the agreement collapsed, Iran could pursue nuclear weapons and set off a nuclear arms race in the region. The United States should preserve the JCPOA as one of the few forums for constructive cooperation with Russia.

## POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Some U.S. political leaders, including many members of Congress, are calling on the Trump administration to take a hard line on Iran, including by withdrawing from the JCPOA. We believe that the United States can demonstrate a hard line on Iran without withdrawing from the agreement. Remaining in the JCPOA does not preclude the United States from levying additional sanctions on Iran related to non-nuclear issues, such as missile development and support for Hezbollah and other militant groups. Demonstrating U.S. intolerance of Iranian behavior in non-nuclear spheres can open political breathing room while leaving unaffected an agreement that makes the United States and its allies safer and more secure. Policymakers should frame continuation of the JCPOA as the best way to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and the only option that preserves U.S. credibility.



*Iranian Special Representative on Syrian Affairs Ali Akbar Velayati meets Bashar al-Assad, May 2016. (Photo courtesy Tasnim News Agency)*

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGING RUSSIA



*A Russian military pilot returning to Russia from Syria, March 2016. (Photo courtesy Russian Ministry of Defense)*

During our field research in Moscow we gained a greater understanding of the motivations underlying Russian foreign policy. We propose the following general guidelines for U.S. policy toward Russia in the Middle East:

### 1) Narrow the topics of engagement with Russia.

This is the only way to maintain some form of dialogue without compromising values or unnecessarily ceding ground to Putin. It is unlikely the United States and Russia will come to an agreement on the definition of “terrorism” in Syria or the moral bounds of the tactics that can be used to engage them. However, specific counterterror operations, along with Iranian encroachment on Israel’s border, are possible windows for discussion that could serve to maintain some form of open dialogue.

### 2) Do not underestimate Russian resolve.

Some American observers wonder why the Russian people don’t openly revolt against a government that

treats them so poorly. Recent years have seen an uptick in protests, and Alexey Navalny’s election boycott may represent the most robust opposition to Putin in years. However, a mass revolt against the Kremlin is not coming soon for these important reasons:

- **The Kremlin has skillfully encouraged citizens to compare their economic circumstances not to the years before the Ukraine sanctions, when oil and gas prices were also much higher, but to the chaos of the 1990s.** The government also compares the poverty of the “democratic” 1990s unfavorably to romanticized versions of the Soviet era and even tsarist rule. Hence, as long as the country does not descend to the remembered horrors of the 1990s, sacrifices like a drop in social services due to troop deployments in Ukraine and Syria are unlikely to provoke a visceral reaction.
- **The Kremlin has a stranglehold on information.** There are two or three independent news sources left in Russia. State-controlled media’s



ability to shape the domestic narrative should not be underestimated.

- **Regime security and reassertion on the world stage are the primary aims for Putin's circle; the general population shares this desire to reclaim respect for Russia.** Some Russians like Putin because he is a strong leader who doesn't kowtow to the West. Putin's powerful image, combined with the popular historical narrative of Russia as deserving of great power status, are crucial to the regime's stability and success.
- **Putin's regime has effectively suppressed every outlet for political opposition.** They have done so by arresting opposition leaders, severely restricting civil society organizations, and violently repressing citizen protests, among other draconian measures.

### 3) Recognize Russia's sense of insecurity.

Russians' perception of diminished power and the lingering feeling that they were taken advantage of during the 1990s have had lasting effects. The debate continues concerning NATO's expansion, and whether Russia recognizes the United States as

receptive to its complaints, or whether it actually does fear a NATO incursion in the Western Military District. However, Putin often speaks about "destabilizing" wars initiated by the United States and her allies and Western Europe's encroachment on Russia's (diminished) sphere of influence. For this reason, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to fully separate U.S. policy towards Russia in the Middle East from these issues. Narrow subjects of engagement are necessary, but the post-Ukraine invasion sanctions loom large in Russia and will be always be present in any discussion of U.S.-Russia cooperation.

### 4) Strengthen U.S. diplomatic capabilities.

None of the above recommendations is possible without a robust diplomatic corps and consistent outreach of U.S. envoys throughout the region and world. The United States will not have the resources on hand to accomplish its mission without the necessary regional depth and personnel; this includes appointing senior officers at State, ambassadors in the field, and recruitment of junior foreign service officers who can build the department for the future.



*Jocelyn Brown, deputy administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service Office of Capacity Building and Development, Jordanian Minister of Water and Irrigation Hazem El-Nasser, and Jordan Valley Authority Secretary General Saad Abu Hammour inaugurate the Karak Dam, a U.S.-supported development project, in Amman, Jordan, February 2017. (Photo courtesy U.S. Embassy in Jordan)*

## APPENDIX A: FIELD INTERVIEWS

**John Allen**

Brookings Institution

Former Commander, International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan

**Nicholas Berliner**

U.S. Department of State

**Stephen Blank**

American Foreign Policy Council

**Mikhail Bogdanov**

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation

Former Russian Ambassador to Israel and Egypt

**Ryan Crocker**

Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Syria

**Hüseyin Diriöz**

Ambassador to Russia, Republic of Turkey

**Nadia Farra**

U.S. Department of State

**Robert Ford**

Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, Yale University

Former U.S. Ambassador to Algeria and Syria

**Emil Gelebo**

Embassy of Sweden in Moscow

**Steven Heydemann**

Smith College

Brookings Institution

**Luiza Khlebnikova**

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**Nikolay Kozhanov**

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**Mikhail Krutikhin**

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**Luke Murry**

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**Veniamin Popov**

Center for the Partnership of Civilizations, Moscow State Institute of International Relations

Former Russian Ambassador to North Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia

Former Special Presidential Representative for Relations with the Organization of the Islamic Conference

**Michael Ratney**

U.S. Special Envoy for Syria

U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Levant, Syria, Israel, and Palestine Affairs

**Ivan Safranchuk**

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**Daniel Silverberg**

Office of the U.S. House of Representatives Minority Whip

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**Irina Zvyagelskaya**

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## APPENDIX B: SUMMARIES OF SUPPLEMENTAL PAPERS

### THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA: EXPLORING AREAS OF COOPERATION VIS-À-VIS IRAN

*Alexander Brockwehl*

This paper considers the divergent approaches of Russia and the United States toward Iran and asks whether there are spaces for Russian-American cooperation with regard to Iran. While the U.S.-Iranian relationship is defined by mutual distrust, Moscow has often viewed Tehran as a valuable partner for pursuing its goals of maintaining a foothold in the region and undercutting American regional hegemony. The paper identifies four main issue areas, each of which is impacted by U.S. and Russian actions: Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, terrorism, and Iran's involvement in Syria. On nuclear weapons, the paper asserts that the United States should uphold the JCPOA because failing to do so would undermine American credibility and increase Russian regional influence. The paper proposes reopening discussions with the P5+1, but with a narrow focus on Iranian acquisition of ballistic missiles. Taking this approach would once again bring the Iran issue under the purview of the UN Security Council, in line with Russian preferences, but it would also force Russia to choose between helping to restrain Iran or adopting a more difficult diplomatic position in defense of its provocations. Regarding Iran's role in Syria, the United States should back Israel's coercive diplomacy efforts while attempting to force Russia to choose between enabling Iran and supporting Israel's right to defend itself. Overall, Iran constitutes a space of regional competition between Russia and the United States; however, the United States should seize the rare opportunities that exist to cooperate with Russia while seeking to exploit divisions between Russia and Iran.

### AMERICAN AND RUSSIAN COUNTERTERRORISM INTERESTS: COOPERATION, COMPETITION, OR CONFLICT?

*Amy Coppernoll*

This paper examines American and Russian counterterrorism histories before 9/11 and finds that since the

attacks, robust counterterrorism cooperation has failed to manifest between the two countries. As the Syrian civil war unfolded, the United States catalyzed a coalition of partner nations to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and inhibit the group from launching an attack on American soil or that of U.S. allies. Russia intervened to protect its historic investment in Syria by consolidating the Assad regime's control over the country, and ensure foreign terrorist fighters from Russia do not return home. In assessing these engagements in the Syrian conflict, the author concludes that limited cooperation on counterterrorism initiatives is possible, but cannot become a panacea for strategic-level relations. As the military defeat of ISIS looms near, the United States and Russia, no longer bound by a common enemy, are poised to maintain fundamentally different views over which armed groups operating in Syria and the region constitute terrorist entities. Time is of the essence in forging mutual understanding and building trust. A first step could be reviving the Counterterrorism Working Group of the United States-Russia Presidential Commission or the Russian-American Law Enforcement Working Group, which used to fight cybercrime and could help inhibit terrorist propaganda. Naturally, caution is needed; advancing traditional counterterrorism cooperation such as intelligence sharing is a political non-starter in the United States at this time. However, such initiatives could save lives and help repair relations.

### SAUDI ARABIA'S EVOLVING POSITION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA

*Stefan Kondić*

Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as an indispensable economic and military partner in the region. Traditionally, Moscow has not been able to rupture this relationship or make substantial inroads, but this no longer appears as certain as it once did, with King Salman's unprecedented visit to Moscow in October threatening to alter the established power dynamics. The paper looks at Saudi interests vis-à-vis the United States and Russia, before looking at potential reasons

for the improvement in Saudi-Russian relations: gaining leverage with the United States, trying to use Russia's influence with Syria and Iran to further their own interests with regards to those countries, and energy ties.

While a long-term strategy should incorporate improving relations with Russia, in the short term this is unlikely to happen. As such, the United States should do its best to prevent increasing Russian influence with traditional American allies, including Saudi Arabia. The main findings of the paper are that Washington should present a strong, consistent message and maintain policy continuity to preserve its image as a reliable and credible partner, remaining active in the region in some capacity to maintain its influence, and finally that Saudi Arabia is unlikely to defect fully into the Russian camp due to strong and long-standing ties with the United States. American economic and military dominance is not going to be seriously challenged by Russia in the near future. As long as Washington is perceived as a reliable partner, and regional allies believe their interests play a substantial part in the political calculus of U.S. policy in the region, it is in the self-interest of Middle Eastern nations, Saudi Arabia included, to remain part of the U.S. alliance and economic sphere.

## **POLITICAL TRANSITION: OPPORTUNITIES AND SPOILERS**

*Mary Ana McGlasson*

With the establishment of the Astana peace talks in January 2017 and the agreement on de-escalation zones guaranteed by Russia, Iran, and Turkey in effect since October 12, 2017, the possibilities for productive negotiation may be ripe. Conditions have also never been more complicated, and will become increasingly more intractable with time. This document aims to:

- Provide a brief overview of key historical dynamics leading to the contemporary context
- Outline key stakeholders and relative bargaining positions at the time of writing

- Provide an overview of key peace attempts and negotiation documents agreed to date, with short reflection on their current relevance
- Detail this author's understanding of key factors required to achieve a viable negotiated peace agreement based on extensive review of literature, key informant interviews and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter based on the author's direct work for more than five years
- Discuss major obstacles and risks that might undermine attempts for transitional peace and justice

Prospects for a viable political transition are at extreme risk for failure without credible assurances guaranteed by outside powers. The parties will approach key issues from diametrically opposed positions, further fueled by distrust, ideologies, and sectarianism. However, given the relatively weak positions of the parties to continue the war on their own without patronage by outside powers, there is a powerful role to be played by Russia and Iran in persuading Assad to accept a face-saving, but absolutely essential plan for his departure. Turkey, the United States, the UK, the EU, and the Gulf States, on the other hand, must persuade the opposition groups of their extremely weak bargaining position and the need for immediate negotiation.

## **TURKEY'S CHANGING ALLEGIANCE**

*Margaret Mullins*

In light of its changing political positioning in the region, Turkey plays a unique role in relation to both the United States and Russia in the broader Middle East defined by the strategic interests of both the United States and Russia in Turkey, and Turkey's priorities in the region. This reality is determined by the personalities contributing to the increasing complexity of the regional interactions, as well as the political, economic, and military framework in which Turkey is currently operating. A member of NATO and previously rising democracy, Turkey looks like neither a Western ally nor a democracy. Erdogan and Putin have increased their interactions; Erdogan has taken measures to destabilize domestic Turkish democratic

institutions; and the ongoing Astana talks regarding a possible way forward in Syria have all but left the United States in the dark. Turkey is an important player in current Middle East politics, both geographically and politically. While Turkey's primary focus remains on quashing any attempts by Kurds in the region to advance an independence push, Erdogan has taken steps to assert Turkey into the region's negotiations much in the same way Putin has. It is unclear whether U.S. and Turkish diplomatic relations, political ties, and military cooperation will stabilize and regain the strength they held in early 2016, but it is clear that Turkey's role in the Syrian and Iraqi endgame will only continue to grow. It is possible the United States maintains more leverage that it has yet to use, but that leverage likely has a shelf life that could just as easily push Turkey completely out of NATO and into the embrace of the Kremlin if applied too hard.

#### **CAPITALIZING ON RUSSIAN, IRANIAN ENERGY VULNERABILITIES**

*Marcelo Norsworthy*

The competing business, economic, diplomatic, and security implications of energy have precipitated nontraditional partnerships and tested long-standing relationships in the Middle East. Although Russia appears strongly positioned on energy, its dependency on hydrocarbon exports has left it vulnerable to prolonged periods of low oil and gas prices. Oil and gas revenues accounted for an average of 46 percent of federal revenues in Russia over the past five years, although the annual figure dropped to just under 36 percent for 2016. Despite fiscal pressures, Russia has expanded its footprint in the Middle East primarily through state-owned oil and gas companies like Gazprom, Rosneft, and Transneft and pursued new deals with countries such as Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt. Russia's success in pursuing energy deals has strengthened its diplomatic hand and provided inroads with U.S.-partnered regimes, but also left it vulnerable to the balancing act of maintaining delicately balanced relationships.

In Syria, the Kurds have gained control of much, but not all, of the oil and gas infrastructure previously

held by ISIS. These oil fields, pipelines, and refineries are important assets for financing the reconstruction efforts and to solidify political control in the war-torn nation. Who controls these assets, which foreign companies operate them, and how the revenues are used are outstanding questions for actors in Syria and will be a source of competition and conflict in the near-term.

#### **IRAQ AND U.S. LEGITIMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

*Christine Östlund*

Although Iraq will not be the center stage of developments for U.S.-Russia relations in the Middle East, the country nevertheless remains strategically important for the United States in the region. Positive developments in Iraq are critical to the broader legitimacy of U.S. engagement in the Middle East. While U.S. military presence in Iraq is likely to continue for an extended time, Russia's presence is both limited and unlikely to expand significantly. Post-2003 instability in Iraq constitutes a convenient "showcase" for Russian arguments against regime change without viable alternatives, as well as flawed U.S. policies in the region.

Ethnic and sectarian tensions will remain in Iraq after the fall of ISIS. A vital precondition for overcoming these tensions is the establishment of an inclusive political settlement that encourages political cooperation and pluralistic representation. Of the tools available for engaging in Iraq, diplomatic engagement aimed at ensuring a democratic dividend of the military presence is where the United States should prioritize its efforts. In addition to addressing the Sunni-Shi'ite divide, another imminent challenge is the fallout of the Kurdish Independence Referendum in September, which left Kurdistan weak and internally divided, with a political settlement between Baghdad and Erbil a distant goal. Resolving this development would require the United States work to regain credibility as an "honest broker." However, ensuring political stability and preventing ethnic and sectarian tensions from flaring up again appears to be the only certain way out for the U.S. military from Iraq.



## WHO WILL REBUILD SYRIA? WHO WILL PROFIT? WHO WILL PAY? AND WHO WILL SET THE AGENDA?

*Jessica Sarriot*

It will take approximately 20 years and \$200-350 billion to rebuild Syria. Who will provide the capital, who will win the contracts, and the political priorities behind the reconstruction are all at play.

Since countries that have suffered civil war tend to see recurring conflicts, the scope of destruction creates a challenge to regional stability. Reconstruction in Syria ought to be seen by the international community as an opportunity for addressing the causes of the conflict and preventing future conflict. Assad's presumed continued rule unfortunately undercuts this larger objective in a variety of ways:

- Assad has shown his willingness to operate on a skeletal wartime budget and has also stated he will not accept conditional funding.
- Assad has already sought and received financial support from China, Iran, and India, who have been willing to provide funding without preconditions; Assad, and Russia on Assad's behalf, have also been courting Saudi Arabia as a potential funder.
- The Syrian Legislature's 2012 Decree 66 creates the legal grounds for reshaping opposition strongholds into upscale urban development.

U.S. policymakers are facing opposing pressures from humanitarian actors with a mandate to meet humanitarian need and Syria experts such as Ambassador Robert Ford, Sam Heller, and Steven Heydemann, who insist the United States cannot provide any reconstruction funding that passes through Assad. There are only bad options. A third option may exist: using Russia's desire for recognition on the world stage to incentivize pressuring Assad to widen the list of implementing partners for reconstruction.

## ISRAEL'S INTERESTS IN SYRIA AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. AND RUSSIAN DIPLOMACY

*James Smyth*

Israel's primary objectives with respect to the Syrian conflict are to prevent the following: (1) violations of its own territorial sovereignty; (2) Hezbollah taking advantage of the conflict to arm itself with more sophisticated weaponry; and (3) the Iranian military establishing a presence in Syria. Israel has aggressively punished "violations" of these "red lines" by conducting limited but persistent military strikes on assets of the Syrian government and Hezbollah. Russia has to date accommodated these attacks on its partners, coordinating with Israel on military deconfliction and maintaining frequent contact with Israeli leadership. However, Russia's partnership with Iran creates numerous contradictions between Israeli and Russian preferences; for instance, the two states reportedly differ greatly on the acceptable width of an Israel-proposed buffer zone in Syria between Iran-backed militias and the Israeli border. Given America's and Israel's shared interest in containing Iran, the two states could collaborate to minimize Iranian influence in Syria and drive a wedge between Russia and Iran. The United States has acted as an interlocutor for Israel in partial ceasefire talks with Russia and Jordan, but Israel has stated that subsequent agreements did not meet its own security needs. Meanwhile, Israel has taken advantage of the Syrian conflict to further consolidate control over the Israeli Golan Heights, arguing that there is no functioning government to which this disputed territory could be returned; and Prime Minister Netanyahu has expressed support for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, which might incentivize Syrian Kurds to value Israeli priorities like blocking a land passage from Tehran to Beirut.

## **POSSIBLE U.S.-RUSSIAN COOPERATION ON REFUGEES AND HUMANITARIAN ISSUES IN SYRIA**

*Kent Troutman*

As a result of the protracted conflict in Syria and the surrounding region, over 5 million refugees are residing in countries in the region, nearly 1 million in Europe, and around 0.2 million elsewhere—approximately 7 million in total. Furthermore, around 0.1 million Syrian civilians and 0.19 million combatants have lost their lives. All told, over 60 percent of Syria's pre-war population has either fled the country, been forced to leave their home, or been killed. Helping Syria recover from this challenge will require substantial effort on the part of the international community.

My research focuses on three possible avenues of cooperation between Russia and the United States with respect to the refugee population.

1. Regional resettlement: I explore the possibility for cooperation on pressuring and facilitating the resettlement of refugees, either permanently or otherwise, in Gulf countries which have heretofore contributed little to resettlement. I conclude that at this time this is unlikely to gain traction due to the issue's low concern relative to other priorities.
2. Funding: I highlight Russia's shortcomings on funding humanitarian efforts and how the United States could use Russia's desire to improve its global image to increase that funding. I conclude that this has potential, although it suffers from low-priority status again, from the U.S. side.
3. Repatriation protection: I use previous mass refugee waves from conflict zones such as Rwanda to consider how the United States and Russia could, through a multilateral body such as UNHCR, help secure the safety and return of Syrians to Syria. I conclude that this is promising and is consistent with both Russian and American interests with respect to Syria going forward.

## **SYRIA'S KURDS, A GLIMMER OF HOPE FOR U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

*Andi Zhou*

Syria's Kurds have emerged as a key player in the Syrian civil war. The PYD, the strongest Kurdish party, and its associated Syrian Democratic Forces are setting up a de facto autonomous state north and east of the Euphrates River that they have dubbed "Rojava." Despite its demonstrated military effectiveness on the ground, the PYD's standing in Syria is complicated by its fraught relations with the regime, neighboring states, and other groups within Syria. In addition, conflict within the Syrian Kurds among different tribes, clans, and political factions poses no less of a challenge. Nevertheless, after working at cross-purposes for most of the Syrian conflict, the United States and Russia are finally seeing their interests in Syria converge on the issue of the Kurds. The United States has partnered with the PYD in the fight against ISIS, but it is loath to further imperil an already troubled alliance with Turkey. On the other hand, Russia, long partnered with the Kurds to contain their common enemy Turkey, is now nurturing a nascent partnership with Turkey while attempting to maintain open channels with the Kurds. Both powers thus find themselves treading the same delicate balance between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. Amidst all the disagreements that have shattered the U.S.-Russia relationship, Syria's Kurds could present a rare opportunity for the two countries to push in the same direction.

## APPENDIX C: WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

### ALEXANDER BROCKWEHL

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Alex Brockwehl is a second-year Master in Public Affairs student. Since 2016 he has served as a research analyst for Freedom House's Freedom in the World and Freedom of the Press publications. During the summer of 2017, Alex interned as a Rosenthal Fellow for the Department of State's Political Section in Honduras. From 2012-2016 he managed Freedom House's democracy assistance programs in Latin America and conducted research on emerging threats to free expression and association. From 2011-2012 he worked in Esmeraldas, Ecuador implementing community development projects on behalf of a local non-profit. He holds a B.A. from Union College and speaks Spanish.

### AMY COPPERNOLL

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Amy Coppernoll is a second-year Master in Public Affairs candidate focusing on counterterrorism and national security policy. Prior to attending the Woodrow Wilson School, she worked for Human Rights Watch coordinating the organization's advocacy with the United Nations. Amy holds a B.A. in international relations from the University of Southern California and has studied at the American University in Cairo and the University of Cape Town. She served as a Harold W. Rosenthal Fellow with the U.S. Department of Defense, and interned with the U.S. Department of State, Relief International, and the League of Arab States. Amy speaks Arabic, French, and Spanish.

### STEFAN KONDIĆ

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Stefan Kondić is a Master in Public Affairs candidate specializing in International Relations from Belgrade, Serbia. Stefan's interests are multilateral diplomacy and intergovernmental organizations and institutions, particularly the United Nations system. He has explored these issues through an academic, extracurricular and professional lens, taking courses and writing an honors thesis on the U.N., serving as president of the United Nations Association of Serbia's Youth

Section since 2011, and interning at the U.N. office in Serbia. Through his involvement, he has had the chance to visit twenty countries, and has striven to create more opportunities for young people in his own country.

### MARY ANA MCGLASSON

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Mary Ana McGlasson is a senior humanitarian and international development professional with 15+ years of experience in emergency and disaster response, cross-border assistance, humanitarian access negotiation, and remote management in conflict zones. From 2012-2017, she was Country Director for large humanitarian NGOs based in Gaziantep, Turkey designing and implementing programs throughout Syria with a special focus on Deir Ezzour, Aleppo, and Idlib. Mary Ana holds a Master of Nursing degree from University of Washington and will complete a Master's in Public Policy at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School in June 2018.

### MARGARET MULLINS

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Margaret Mullins served five years as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Army, deploying to Afghanistan in 2013 with 4IBCT 3ID and serving as an aide-de-camp and senior Russia analyst at U.S. Army Europe. She graduated from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in 2010 and is currently a graduate student at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School. She speaks Arabic and Spanish.

### MARCELO NORSWORTHY

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Marcelo is a Master in Public Affairs candidate specializing in international development and pursuing a certificate in Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy. He studied development economics at Tufts University before leading fieldwork for impact evaluation research in Peru and working on air quality and environmental health in the United States. Marcelo focused on international energy economics and policy for this report.

**CHRISTINE ÖSTLUND**

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Christine is a second-year Master in Public Affairs candidate in the economic policy field. She received a B.Sc. from the Stockholm School of Economics in 2013, and also studied at the University of British Columbia. Prior to entering Princeton, she interned in Brussels at the Swedish Permanent Representation to the EU and spent three years working with EU macro and fiscal policy coordination at the Swedish Ministry of Finance. She spent the summer of 2017 interning at the European Central Bank.

**JESSICA SARRIOT**

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Jessica Sarriot is a Master in Public Affairs candidate with a background in international peacebuilding and community organizing. She received a B.A. in Peacebuilding and Development from Eastern Mennonite University in 2013 and went on to work in Medellin, Colombia for two years providing support and capacity building for a grassroots civil society organization. Jessica also worked as a community organizer in Arlington, Virginia for over two years. Immediately before her graduate studies, she conducted independent research on how civil society organizes in Colombia, Mauritania, Northern Iraq, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Jessica has interned with advocacy organizations in Israel-Palestine, Burundi, and most recently with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Amman, Jordan, focusing on UNFPA's work in the "Berm" on the border with Syria. Jessica is fluent in Spanish and French.

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James Smyth is a second-year Master in Public Affairs candidate in the International Relations field. Prior to entering the Woodrow Wilson School, he spent four years as an editor and translator for the Taiwanese government, two years in National Taiwan University's International Chinese Language Program, and two years in the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme as an Assistant Language Teacher in Kumamoto, Japan. He spent the past summer as a research intern at the Institute of Energy

Economics, Japan. He earned his bachelor's degree at Duke University. James speaks Mandarin, Japanese, and Spanish.

**KENT TROUTMAN**

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Kent is a second-year MPA student focusing on economic policy. Prior to Princeton, he spent two years each in Washington D.C. and New York engaged in economic research for the Peterson Institute and Goldman Sachs, respectively. Kent graduated from Drexel University in 2010.

**ANDI ZHOU**

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Andi Zhou is a second-year Master in Public Affairs student. Prior to attending Princeton, Andi worked at the EastWest Institute coordinating U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia Track 2 diplomatic exchanges. Andi was a Harold W. Rosenthal Fellow at the U.S. Department of Labor, working on international child labor, forced labor and human trafficking issues. At Princeton, Andi is co-editor-in-chief of the Journal of Public and International Affairs and a graduate fellow of the Center for International Security Studies. He received a B.A. in global affairs from Yale University in 2013. Andi speaks Mandarin, French, and Hindi.

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Daniel C. Kurtzer is the S. Daniel Abraham Professor of Middle East Policy Studies at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. During a 29-year career in the U.S. Foreign Service, Ambassador Kurtzer served as the United States Ambassador to Israel and as the United States Ambassador to Egypt. He is the co-author of *The Peace Puzzle: America's Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace, 1989-2011*, and editor of *Pathways to Peace: America and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. He served as a member of Secretary of State John Kerry's Foreign Affairs Policy Board and as an advisor to the bipartisan Iraq Study Group. Ambassador Kurtzer received his Ph.D. from Columbia University.



# ENDNOTES

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